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C O N F I D E N T I A L TOKYO 004285

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SUBJECT: ABE HOSPITALIZED: ASO, NUKAGA, YAMASAKI DECLARE
CANDIDACY FOR PRIME MINISTER, OTHERS MAY JOIN

REF: TOKYO 4262

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer, reasons
1.4(b),(d).

11. (S) Summary. "Sheer exhaustion" left Prime Minister Abe physically and mentally unable to continue, according to LDP insiders. Abe was hospitalized on the morning of September 113. LDP leaders, meanwhile, have spent the day hammering out who will succeed Abe and how the election will be conducted. LDP Secretary General Aso, Finance Minister Nukaga, and LDP heavyweight Taku Yamasaki have announced they will run. The race is far from decided. Others seem ready to declare their candidacies. An anti-Aso, draft-Koizumi movement is gaining momentum. Koizumi continues to say he won't run, but his closest staffers say he could be persuaded. The earliest date for the elections for the LDP Presidency could be September 19, after which the LDP-controlled Lower House would vote in the new PM in one or two days. The Diet recessed pending the election of the new Prime Minister, which will delay deliberations on anti-terror legislation to continue Japan's support for OEF. Japanese media have focused on U.S. reaction to the resignation, and, in particular, the fate of the anti-terror bill. End Summary.

Aso, Nukaga, Yamasaki Declare Candidacies; Others May Join

12. (C) LDP Secretary General Aso, Finance Minister Nukaga, and LDP heavyweight Taku Yamasaki have announced they will run to replace Prime Minister Abe. Foreign Minister Machimura, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yosano, former Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda, and former Finance Minister Sadakazu Tanigaki are other names mentioned by Embassy contacts and the media as possible replacements for Abe. Aso, whose party committee will set the rules for the election, favors a quick five-day campaign that could elect a successor on September 19. Aso and Tanigaki challenged Abe in July 2006 for the Prime Ministership, coming in a distant second and third. Fukuda dropped out early in that race, even though he was running a respectable second. Aso, Tanigaki, and Yamasaki lead medium to small-sized factions in the LDP, so their support within the party is somewhat limited. None enjoy particularly wide popularity with the

public. Tanigaki and Yamasaki have been the most vocal in their opposition to Abe over the past year.

Possible Koizumi Draft

13. (S) Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is being pushed to run by his staff and a group of anti-Aso, anti-Abe first term Diet members who won their seats as "Koizumi Children." This group is adamantly opposed to reversing the Koizumi "reforms," and have been vocal in opposition to the Abe-Aso-Yosano decision to re-admit postal rebels into the LDP. Koizumi has publicly denied any interest in being drafted, but his former secretary, Isao Iijima, confided to the Embassy that Koizumi's "no" may not be final. Koizumi, alone among LDP politicians, remains widely popular with the public and is the de facto leader of over 60 young lawmakers elected on his coattails in the "postal privatization" election of 2005. Some business leaders have called publicly for a continuation of Koizumi's reform agenda.

The Procedure

14. (S) Within hours of Abe's announcement, ruling LDP officials were engaged in discussions to set the procedures and timeline for selecting his successor as LDP President and Prime Minister. The Aso-run LDP elections committee wants the candidates to declare their intentions by September 14, and hold the election on September 19, according to the press and Embassy sources. Koizumi's aide Iijima told Embassy Tokyo that Koizumi and he have urged some "Koizumi Children" members of the Diet to lobby the LDP leaders for a longer

campaign period, a move that would allow anti-Aso forces a chance to organize and mount a more effective campaign. As recently as the last election, the LDP's internal rules called for a minimum of 12 days. The new president will be elected by a total of 528 votes -- one for each of the 387 LDP Diet members from both houses, and an additional 141 for the 47 LDP prefectural chapters. (Note: The chapters were given six votes each when Abe was elected in 2006, three more than this time around.)

15. (C) The new Prime Minister will be elected at a plenary session of the Lower House. Given the LDP's overwhelming dominance in the lower chamber, Abe will be replaced as prime minister by his successor as President of the LDP. The Speaker of the House is empowered to call a plenary session, and could do so as quickly as the day after the LDP presidential election. Prime Minister Abe and his ministers will continue in their positions until a new prime minister is elected by the House of Representatives.

Abe's Sudden Resignation: "Sheer Exhaustion"

16. (C) Ex-Ambassador Hisahiko Okazaki, a close advisor to Abe, told the Embassy that Abe had collapsed from "sheer exhaustion" and was physically and mentally unable to continue. Okazaki related that the PM was so weak that he had to be helped into his home at the end of the day on Wednesday. Others close to Abe confirmed that Abe had indeed collapsed. Embassy contacts speculate the strains of never-ending scandals, a crushing defeat in July Upper House elections, and the daunting task of trying to push his legislative agenda through an opposition-controlled Upper House contributed to Abe's emotional decision to resign. Another advisor to the Abe family told the Embassy that Abe "lost the will to fight."

17. (C) Chief Cabinet Secretary Yosano announced on September 13 that Abe was undergoing a medical examination, and doctors confirmed later in the day that Abe had been hospitalized for the next several days for gastrointestinal problems. Abe has

been widely rumored to have suffered for years from colitis. An Asahi article reported that doctors and nurses have been posted at Abe's official residence recently, and that Abe has received an intravenous drip on several occasions. He is also reported to have complained that he was feeling emotionally and physically drained after his recent swing through Southeast Asia, although an Embassy contact with him on that trip said that he noticed nothing strange.

18. (C) Press reports on September 13 focused on a combination of mental and physical exhaustion to explain Abe's resignation. Although there are sensational stories of scandals that were about to emerge in one of the weekly magazines regarding evasion of the inheritance tax and Abe's mother's contacts with a cult-like religious group, all in the LDP and all Embassy contacts dismiss these stories as having no impact on Abe's decision to step down.

19. (C) Public reaction to Abe's unexpected announcement has been negative. Many commentators expressed disappointment that Abe lacked the "courage" to stay on and criticized him for taking a "selfish" and ill-considered action. LDP lawmakers have mostly expressed anger, with many noting that Abe should have resigned earlier or later, but not now.

Diet Session on Hold: Anti-Terror Bill will be delayed

110. (C) The Diet session, which just opened on September 10, is temporarily on hold pending the results of the LDP leadership race, leaving the future of anti-terror legislation to authorize Japan's continued commitment to refueling operations in the Indian Ocean in doubt. Prior to Abe's resignation, the LDP had given up on the notion of extending the current Anti-Terror Special Measures Law beyond its November 1 expiration date in favor of introducing a new

law that would be certain to pass even if the opposition used parliamentary delaying tactics in the Upper House. The delay to the start of the Diet session will likely slow passage of a new bill (septel). The Japanese media on September 13 gave prominent coverage to official U.S. reactions to Abe's resignation, with an emphasis on the future of anti-terror legislation.
Schieffer